

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 32

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To avoyde voluptuousnesse in regarde of life

I HAVE NOTED the greatest part of ancient opinions to agree in this: That when our life affords more evill then good, it is then time to die: and to preserve our life to our torment and incommodie, is to spurre and shooke the verie rules of nature: as say these olde rules.

ἢ ζῆν ἀλύπως, ἢ θανεῖν εὐδαιμόνως.

Or live without distresse,
Or die with happinesse.

Καλόν θνήσκεινοῖς ὕβριν τὸ ζῆν φέρει.

T'is good for them to die,
Whom life bring's infamie.

Κρεῖσσον τὸ μὴ ζῆν ἐστίν, ἢ ζῆν ἀθλίως.

T'is better not to live,
Than wretchedly not thrive.

But to drive-off the contempt of death to such a degree, as to imploy-it to distract, and remove himselfe from honours, riches, greatnes, and other goodes and favours, which we call the goodes of fortune: as if reason had not enough to doe, to perswade-us to forgoe and leave them, without adding this new surcharge unto-it, I had neither seene the same commanded nor practised untill such time as one place of *Seneca* came to my hands, wherein counselling *Lucilius* (a man mightie and in great authoritie about the Emperour) to change this voluptuous and pompous life, and to withdraw himselfe from this ambition of the world, to some sollitarie, quiet and philosophicall life: about which *Lucilius* alleaged some difficulties: *My advise is (saith-he) that either thou leave and quit that course, or thy life altogether: But I perswade thee to followe the gentler way, and rather to untie then breake what thou hast so ill knit: alwaies provided thou breake it, if thou canst not otherwise untie the same.* There is no man so base-minded, that loveth not

rather to fall once, then ever to remaine in feare of falling. I should have deemed this counsel agreeing with the Stoickes rudenes: But it is more strange it should be borrowed of *Epicurus*, who to that purpose writeth this consonant unto *Idomeneus*. Yet thinke I to have noted some such like thing amongst our owne people, but with christian moderation. Saint *Hilarie* Bishop of *Poitiers*, a famous enimie of *Arrians* heresie, being in *Syria*, was advertised that *Abra* his onely daughter whom hee had left at-home with hir mother, was by the greatest Lordes of the countrie solicited and sued-unto for marriage, as a damosell very well brought-up, faire, rich, and in the prime of hir age: he writ unto her (as we see) that she should remove hir affections, from all the pleasures and advantages might be presented hir: for, in his voyage hee had found a greater and worthier match or husband of farre higher power and magnificence, who should present and endowe hir with roabes and jewels of unvaluable price. His purpose was to make hir loose the appetite and use of worldly pleasures, and wholie to wed hir unto God. To which, deeming his daughters death, the shortest and most assured way, he never ceased by vowes, prayers, and orisons, humbly to beseech God to take her out of this worlde, and to call her to his mercie, as it came to passe; for shee deceased soone after his returne: whereof he shewed manifest tokens of singular gladnesse. This man seemeth to endeere himselfe above others, in that at first sight he addresseth himselfe to this meane, which they never embrace but subsidiarily, and sithence it is towards his onely daughter. But I will omit the successe of this storie, although it be not to my purpose. Saint *Hilaries* wife, having understood by him, how her daughters death succeeded with his intent and will, and how much more happie it was for her to be dislodged from out this world, then still to abide therein, conceived so lively an apprehension of the eternall and heavenly blessednesse, that with importunate instancie she solicited her husband, to doe as much for her. And God, at their earnest entreatie, and joynt-common prayers, having soone after taken her unto himselfe: it was a death embraced with singular and mutuall contentment to both.